



[N F S Grundtvig, 1783–1872](#)

School for Life

“A folk high school becomes what it is because of the individuals of which it is made. Learning happens across social positions and differences – the teacher learns from the student and vice versa in a living exchange and mutual teaching. For Grundtvig dialogue across differences was essential – the ideal was that people must learn to bear with the differences of each other before enlightenment can be realized.”

[\(Wikipedia entry on Folk High School\)](#)

N F S Grundtvig was the pioneer of the idea of the “Folk High School”, the first of which was established by some of his followers, in Denmark, in 1844.

The Danish Folk High Schools continue to flourish up to today and are now more numerous than ever.

As we would expect, Denmark's history is both different and similar to that of other countries.

In step with other Western European continental countries, Denmark passed through two major transitions: abolition of serfs, co-incident with the French revolution in the late 18th Century; and institution of bourgeois democracy, co-incident with the widespread revolutions of 1848.

Insofar as these were unilateral reversals of previous power and property relations, they were violent. But Danes are apt to say that they never had any revolutions; by which they mean that the bloodshed and carnage that accompanied revolutionary change elsewhere, was absent in the case of Denmark.

Denmark moved, in the 19th Century, from being an extremely divided population, of which the larger part was rural, uneducated, poor and insecure, to being a modern and much more homogenous society of near-universal literacy.

Denmark became a nation, in the sense of the word "nation" that we in South Africa use when we speak of nation-building, which is to say both democratic, and educated. Or, we might more pointedly say: educated, and thereby democratic.

For the purposes of this CU course on Education, the most remarkable, typical characteristic of the Folk High School is that there is no prior educational requirement for entry to the school, and no “qualifications” are issued by the school. This is also how the Communist University works: no entry barrier, and no certificate on exit.

The Danish Folk High Schools did not, and still do not, replace formal education, and did not compete with it or diminish formal education in any way. Quite to the contrary, the informal Folk High Schools complement the formal academic establishment in an entirely benevolent and beneficial manner. This complementarity was part of Grundtvig’s intention when he wrote of the “School for Life”.

What the Folk High Schools did in total was to provide a way in which the level of education among the entire population could be raised in the present time. The formal education system alone could not do this.

Formal education is by nature compartmentalised. Each topic stands apart from all of the others. Formal education as such is predominately confined to the early years of life. The vast provision of resources to formal education must of necessity be concentrated in this way.

This being the case, and in the absence of any other process, it becomes a matter of wishful thinking, or else of resignation to a process lasting many generations, to speak of a general raising of the educational level, if no other thing is done.

In South Africa, the formal education system appears to be fully developed, quantitatively, in the sense that all children are enrolled for entry to school. The system does produce engineers, doctors and other professionals, sufficient for the country's needs. But the drop-out rate is enormous, and even of those who complete schooling, a large proportion remain functionally illiterate and innumerate.

In short, the formal education system is failing to raise the general level of education in the country. This has been the case for generations past, and although there is change for the better in the system, yet those who have been and are still being abandoned are many.

Common expressions of desire for "life-long learning" in South Africa are not matched by corresponding practical provisions, most of the time. Employers are often reluctant to provide.

The strong faith in formal education that exists in bureaucratic and in political circles in South Africa, has up to now driven down all attempts to establish informal and general educational initiatives, whether on the lines of the Danish Folk High Schools, or any other.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [The School for Life, 1838, N F S Grundtvig, Excerpt #1.](#)
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